Impotence and barrenness are well known facts, and magic is much used to cure them; but apart from their operation it is believed that each conception directly depends upon the frequency with which a man visits his wife. And thus the bearing of children is, for a woman, a demonstration of her husband's great affection for her. People adduce the number of children that a woman has borne to prove, in conversation, that she is her husband's favourite.

Polygyny is the ideal of every pagan Nyakyusa; a plurality of wives is necessary, in this society, for full sexual satisfaction, wives bring a man wealth, prestige and authority, the more wives he has the more children, he thinks, will be born to him.

It is believed that any contact with the sexual fluids is dangerous to a young child's health, and so, after a woman has borne a child, her husband is supposed strictly to refrain from intercourse with her for about a year until the child is old enough to play by itself and allow its mother time to wash in the mornings before touching it. Then he may begin to visit her again, but still she must not become pregnant until the child is weaned. "If she does her breasts become rotten" and the first child is harmed. As children are not weaned for two or three years, this rule involves the couple in yet another year or more either of coitus interruptus or of infrequent intercourse (which also is believed to avoid conception). These taboos on intercourse after a child's birth are to some extent observed in practice, and are one of the reasons for polygyny among the Nyakyusa.

Another reason is the absence of hired labour. With a few minor exceptions the only way a man can increase the supply of labour at his disposal is by marrying more wives. Polygyny is the mark of a wealthy man, conditioned by his control of cattle, conditioning his supply of food. And the cattle spent in marriage come back again with interest as the polygynist's daughters begin to be betrothed and married.

It is extremely common for a man to take as his second or third wife the sister, half-sister, or brother's daughter of his first or second wife. By doing so a man pays a great compliment to the wife whose sister, or niece, he takes and to her family; his action implies complete satisfaction with her and friendship with her family. He sends his wife home "to fetch out (her kinswoman) into the open" (ukusokola); but she will not agree to do so unless she approves of him as a husband, and so, if she does agree, her action likewise compliments him. I know of one case in which a man wished to take his second wife's younger sister in this way.